

# Feature



## Dreams of a Fairy World *Tara Maginnis*

*A production of Midsummer Night's Dream demonstrates how post-processing photos can create for the eye what the costumer had in mind.*

Being told you “get” to design *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for a theatrical costumer is a bit like telling an actor he’s



Mustardseed in a publicity image created by the author for the 2008 Diablo Valley College production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.



Live on stage photos (Puck and Oberon) are evocative of the performance and necessary in a portfolio, but in most cases they don't actually show enough costume details to make them sufficient as documentation by themselves

been cast as Hamlet. Ideally, it is an expected mid-career project that one works up to gradually over many years of thinking about it beforehand. Unless your director demands you do something really witless with it, (or you slip and do so) it is expected it will hold a pride of place in your portfolio for the rest of your days.

Consequently being told you are about to do it will put you into panic, because no matter how little money, worker time, and

student labor is assigned to the show, the designer must, for reputation's sake, churn out an impressive set of renderings before the build, and a gorgeous set of photos after.

Alas, typically taking good live stage photos for a show predominantly taking place in a forest at night is chancy, and for good detailed costume shots is generally impossible, so an intelligent designer will take some posed photos off stage as well.

I've found over the years that the easiest way to get good individual posed costume shots is to set up an impromptu photo studio in the actors' Green Room before and during a performance. Just hang up a blank background, provide some sort of diffused light, tell actors what you are doing and let them know you will post all the photos online within 48 hours (so they get them too) and everyone will not only



Showy renderings done before the build, besides being useful for the director and other designers, can help recruit volunteer help in your studio, charm your actors into multiple fittings and assistance, pull audiences to the show if posted in public places, and make an important show shine in your portfolio.

cooperate, but will actively think up poses and groupings and ideas for you.

While doing this, it helps if you keep talking to your actors, making jokes, telling them how to pose, complementing them with giggling when they think of a funny one, giving them lots of “hold that”, “big eyes”, “look angry at something just about up here”, “if you

looked any cuter I'd barf”, “oh yes, YES!”, etc. Even actors get self-conscious about posing for photos unless you are clearly letting them feel they are really delighting you by what they are doing, and self-conscious people take lousy photos.

The single most important way to get good pictures is to take lots of them while the subject is happy and relaxed, and the easiest way to bring that about is to act yourself as if you are so amused and delighted you can't wait to show them the photos. Then, if possible do show them the photos, and wipe out any picture they say they hate, so they relax further, and tell their



Two of the male fairies ham it up for the camera.

fellow cast mates to come and do more photos. No amount of FX will make a lousy photo look good, it can only make a good one better. Garbage in=garbage out. So concentrate on getting good facial expressions and poses first.

For Dream, I originally thought I'd just put up a green fabric background, but after finding I didn't have enough spare green fabric in the Costume Studio to do this I bought a cheap [Chroma key](#) “Green Screen” on eBay, as the easiest way to get a good green backdrop. Once I had it however, I realized just how much fun I could have with our fairies if I used the Green Screen as it was meant to be used: as a way to isolate characters from their backgrounds.

I asked actors playing fairies to get in positions that suggested that they were small, or flying through the air. I had the Mechanicals pose as if they were being frightened by small flying fairies, I had technicians pose as if they were doing their work on actors 8-9" tall, I had the Nobles pose "sleeping" or holding small invisible creatures in their hands.



Hermia (above); Lavendar (below)



Fairies flying (above); A Mechanical (below)



The next day I also went walking in my garden, and in the woods near my house, taking photos of nature backgrounds, both in close-up and long shots. I lay on my belly to make some background views for a person 9" tall, where flowers would tower over them, and stood for other views for a normal sized person, framed in a woodland scene. Because most good costume shots are in

portrait aspect, I took most of these backgrounds in portrait not landscape mode.

Armed with these Green Screen actor photos and generic nature photos, I then played about in my favorite photo program, [Adobe Photoshop](#) CS3, to make unusual portfolio shots. While I used a "Full Version" of Photoshop, these same effects can be rendered in the much cheaper Adobe Photoshop Elements, or indeed any other photo program that allows you to

work in multiple layers. Because of this I will describe the process in broad generic terms so you can understand how you can do this with the photo program you use, not just Photoshop.



In the simplest form I take a fairy character and replace the Green Screen area with a nature background, and add some "[Lens Flare](#)" effects for a magical look: A photo of a damaged cobweb on my garbage can is rotated, duplicated, flipped and merged into a basic cobweb background.





Juliet Paulson as “Cobweb” in *Dream* is selected out from the green background of the original photo, and pasted into a new clear layer. (See your manual for how to do this with your photo editing software.)



The layer is given a drop shadow effect with a violet shadow.



Then the two layers are merged. Two “Lens Flare” filter effects are added near the hands to suggest that she is casting spells:

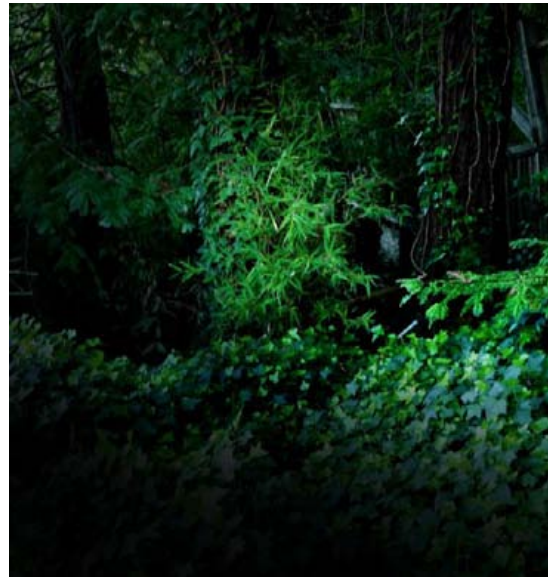
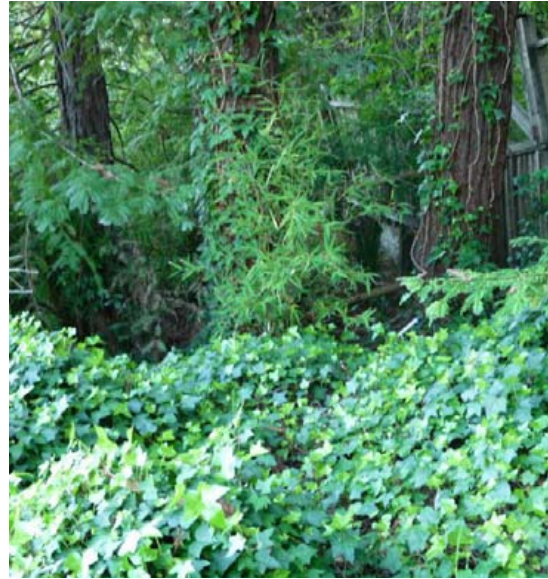


To make the lens flare act as a backlight for part of the figure, simply put it on the background image before merging with the figure, as shown in this sequence:





Combining two or more figures is slightly more complex, but similar in method. First, the background image is selected and darkened to resemble a night forest:



The first figure (Demetrius) is selected out, copied, and layered on the background (layer 1):



The layer is darkened to blend when overlaid onto the background:





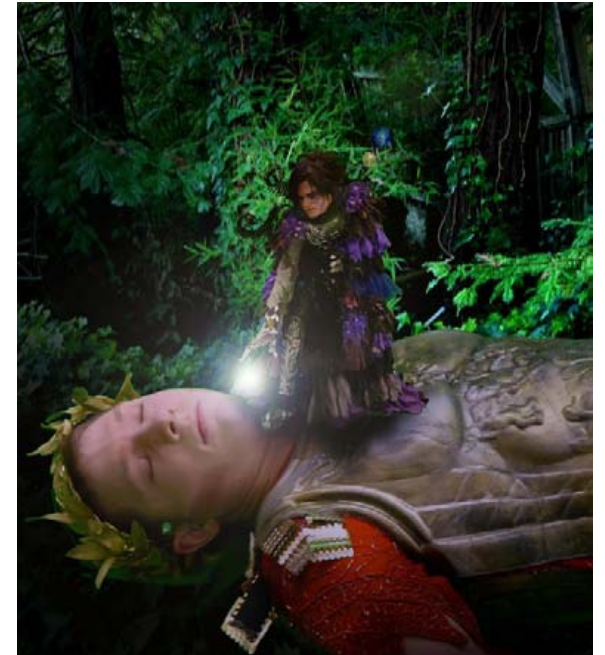
Now, the second figure (Oberon) is selected out, copied, layered (layer 2) over the first, reduced and placed:



A small shadow is made and added at Oberon's feet to better join the figures:



Finally, a lens flare is added for a magical effect:



Simple hand rendered shadows “sell” the reality of even the most improbable photos.



Redwoods from my yard are tweaked with saturation to be brighter.



Then, Ellery is pasted in as a layer (layer 1) over them.



When you want one or more figures to look like they are flying you can work with more than one layer on an individual figure, one with motion blur, and an overlying layer that is partly transparent. Here, Ellery Urquhart as “Bottom” is selected out from the green background and copied.



Noelle Sullivan as Titania is selected and copied from her photo and pasted in another layer (layer 2) onto Bottom.



Layer 2 is lightened, rotated slightly, flipped horizontally, and reduced to fit the composition.



Layer 2 is duplicated making layer 3:



Layer 2 is temporarily made invisible to work on layer 3. Layer 3 is made 50% transparent, and the edges erased to make them more transparent.



Layer 3 is temporarily made invisible to work on layer 2. Layer 2 is motion blurred to give Titania the illusion of flying.



All layers are turned back on and flattened.



Two lens flares are added for magical effect. This sort of layering can be repeated many times to put in many figures.



These attendants of Oberon suggest they are tiny by looking up at something which is apparently larger.



This idea is reinforced by pasting them in a landscape where pebbles and flowers seem to be of similar size to them.

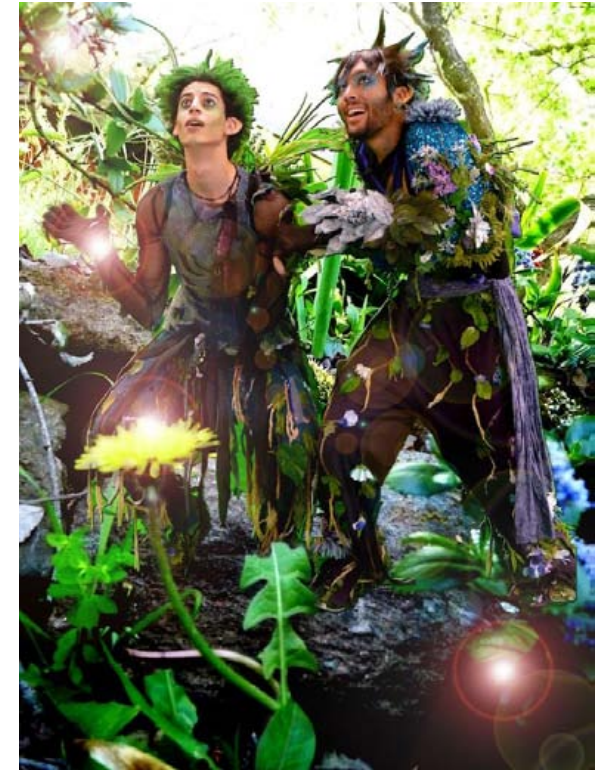


The figures appear to retreat to the middle of the landscape by copying the dandelion image from the background, and pasting it in a layer over the figures.



The figure layer was lightened slightly to match the lighting of the landscape. The image was flattened, and lens flares added. The results are shown, above right.

Visit my [Midsummer Night's Dream](#) web site to download hundreds of raw green screen fairy images from Diablo Valley College's 2008 production, plus my nature background photos to practice with. I encourage you to use them to make images of your own and post them to your friends, Facebook, etc. to learn to use these skills.



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*All photos by Tara Maginnis.*